

Russell Biomass Not Carbon Neutral and Likely to Increase Cordwood Prices

A 9/11/08 CJ editorial about the proposed Russell Biomass project opined that "if the plant is ultimately built, we'll know its impacts have been exhaustively examined," and that "using carbon neutral biomass as fuel would also reduce the region's emissions of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere." This key assumption about carbon neutrality on which the project is based is unsubstantiated, yet it is continually and slavishly repeated by the press. In fact, the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities (DPU) in their recent denial of Russell Biomass' request to overturn Russell's zoning bylaws, wrote that uncertainties about sustainability "prevent the Department from reaching a conclusion on the likely carbon impact of this facility."

I and others had submitted expert testimony at the DPU hearings that Russell Biomass would not be carbon neutral. The project proponents estimate that the plant will emit 1,732 tons per day of carbon dioxide, significantly more carbon dioxide per unit energy generated than any of the ten worst carbon dioxide emitting power plants in the Northeast. In addition to these emissions, petroleum will be used -- and carbon dioxide emitted -- to cut the wood, chip it into tiny pieces, and haul it up to 100 miles in trucks that get less than 10 miles to the gallon, to a \$150 million plant that would take significant energy to build, where it will then be burned with less than 25% efficiency. The only way this could be carbon neutral is if vegetation instantaneously grew back faster than it was burned at the facility. When all the requirements for this operation are factored in, it is evident that Russell Biomass would not be carbon neutral.

The Russell Biomass project is a lose-lose-lose proposition that would be heavily petroleum dependent, would release excessive carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, and would put harmful logging pressures on our carbon dioxide-sequestering forests. Consider that the 500,000 tons of wood required to power the facility annually is a significant portion of the entire current annual timber harvest on Massachusetts public and private lands combined. Greatly increased logging rates would be required to satisfy the increased demand for wood, increasing carbon dioxide emissions in the process. Deforestation is one of the largest sources of carbon dioxide emissions worldwide. In addition, in keeping with the law of supply and demand, people heating their homes with wood would likely face higher cordwood prices, yet another damaging consequence.

Massachusetts should be focusing efforts on energy conservation and carbon-free energy rather than publicly subsidizing projects such as Russell Biomass. The state says that conservation is the cheapest form of energy, costing only 3.5 cents per kilowatt-hour, and further that opportunities for conservation are substantial. Solar, geothermal, and wind energy are not based on combustion with its inevitable carbon dioxide emissions. We need to pursue more advanced energy strategies. But first, we need to stop being fooled by green-washing for projects that bring so many unwelcome consequences.

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